



Mauritania

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. The Government limits freedom of religion by prohibiting the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims. In addition, three small West African Protestant groups, which held prayer sessions in members' homes, were told by police to stop meeting and encouraged to relocate their activities to the compound of the Catholic Church, where the Catholic Church and Evangelical Church hold regular meetings.

There were some changes in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 419,212 square miles, and its population is approximately 3 million. Almost the entire population practices Sunni Islam. There is a very small number of non-Muslims and Roman Catholic or denominational Christian churches have been established in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Although there are no synagogues, a very small number of expatriates practice Judaism.

There are several foreign faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in humanitarian and developmental work in the country. The largest is World Vision, involved in food and other aid projects. Other NGOs include World Advocates and Caritas, each providing various services including the provision of medical care, feeding centers, micro-finance and water treatment.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. The Government limits freedom of religion by prohibiting the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims; however, non-Muslim resident expatriates and a few non-Muslim citizens generally practice their religions openly and freely.

Both the Government and citizenry consider Islam to be the essential cohesive element unifying the country's various ethnic groups. There is a cabinet-level Ministry of Literacy Programs, Islamic Orientation, and Traditional Education. High Council of Islam, consisting of six imams, advises the Government on the conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts. Although the Government provided a small stipend to the imam of the Central Mosque in the capital, mosques and Qur'anic schools are normally supported by their members and other donors.

The Government does not register religious groups; however, secular NGOs, including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of the Interior. Nonprofit organizations, including both religious groups and secular NGOs, generally are not subject to taxation. The judiciary consists of a single system of courts with a modernized legal system that conforms with the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law).

The Government observes Muslim holy days as national holidays, but this practice does not negatively affect other religious groups. A magistrate of Shari'a, who heads a separate government commission, determines the lunar dates for observing religious holidays and addresses the nation on these days.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The implementation of Islamic law has created some limited restrictions on religious freedom. Shari'a, proclaimed the law of the land under a previous government in 1983, includes the Qur'anic prohibition against apostasy or conversion to a religion other than Islam; however, this prohibition has never been codified in civil law or enforced. The small number of known converts from Islam suffered no social ostracism, and there were no reports of societal or governmental attempts to punish them during the period covered by this report.

Although there is no specific legal prohibition against proselytizing by non-Muslims, in practice the Government prohibits such activity through the use of Article 11 of the Press Act. The act bans the publication of any material that is against, contradicts, or otherwise threatens Islamic principles. The Government views any attempts by practitioners of other religions to convert Muslims as undermining society. Foreign faith-based NGOs limit their activities to humanitarian and development assistance.

Under Article 11 of the Press Law, the Government may restrict the importation, printing, or public distribution of Bibles or other non-Islamic religious literature. In practice, Bibles are neither printed nor publicly sold in the country; however, the possession of Bibles and other non-Islamic religious materials in private homes is not illegal, and Bibles and other religious publications are available among the small non-Islamic communities.

Except for the President, the members of the 5-person Constitutional Council, and the 10-person High Council of Magistrates over which the President presides, government employees or members of the ruling political party are not required to take a religious oath. The Constitutional Council and the High Council of Magistrates advise the President in matters of law and the Constitution. The oath of office includes a promise to God to uphold the law of the land in conformity with Islamic precepts.

Both the privately run Qur'anic schools and the Government's public schools include classes on religion. These classes teach the history and principles of Islam and the classical Arabic of the Qur'an. Although attendance at these religious classes is ostensibly required, many students, the great majority of whom are Muslims, decline to attend them for diverse ethno-linguistic and religious reasons. Since these classes determine a disproportionately small percentage of the overall grade, students are able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas, provided they compensate for their failure to attend the religion classes by their performance in other classes.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Following the 2003 crackdown on Islamic activists, the Government closed a number of Saudi- and Gulf-funded Islamic schools and charities. These organizations remained closed at the end of the period covered by this report. The Government also closed an Islamic charity association in 2003 for its alleged connections to local Islamic activists. The government-funded Institute for Islamic Science, Studies, and Research (ISERI), remained open and fully funded.

In March 2005, the Government arrested Islamists that it claimed were tied to terrorism. It detained approximately 60 individuals, including Islamist leaders Cheikh Mohamed El Hacen Ould Dedew and Mactar Ould Mohamed Moussa, both of whom remained in jail at the end period covered by this report. Both have been arrested and released repeatedly over the last few years. Most of the other detainees also remained imprisoned, although at least 12 were released after several days.

In May, as part of this crackdown, the Government began searching mosques, seizing Qur'anic texts and arresting mosque officials. The Government has also restricted the use of mosque loudspeakers exclusively for the call to prayer and Friday service. Many of those arrested, including Dedew and Moussa, have been charged with membership in unrecognized groups, inciting violence, and making harmful political statements at mosques.

A 2003 law prohibits the use of mosques for any form of political activity, including the distribution of propaganda and incitement to violence. While Islamists have been detained, the Government has held that this crackdown is aimed at fighting terrorism; however, NGOs claim that is aimed at suppressing political opposition. The terrorists' attack on June 4 against a military outpost in the northeast near the border with Mali has led citizens to conclude, as the Government has argued, that a terrorist threat exists and is growing.

In April, four small Protestant groups, which held prayer sessions in members' homes, were told by police to stop meeting until they received official recognition. In fact, no non-Islamic groups have ever been recognized, including the Catholic Church, which operates openly in its facility in Nouakchott. It is unclear, however, if the prohibition was a decision made at a high government level or the action of police officials acting on neighbors' complaints.

Shari'a law provides the legal principles upon which the country's law and legal procedure are based. The testimony of two women is necessary to equal that of one man. In addition, in awarding an indemnity to the family of a woman who has been killed, the courts grant only half the amount that they would award for a man's death. For commercial and other issues not addressed specifically by Shari'a, the law and courts treat women and men equally.

Excluding those Islamists previously mentioned, there were no additional reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. There were no reported incidents of interreligious violence during this period. Several public protests were conducted against the Government's continued recognition of Israel, and derogatory statements were made about Jews. Small anti-Israeli protests took place before, during, and after the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom on May 3. Anti-Israeli graffiti was also visible during this period.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. Embassy monitors developments affecting religious freedom and maintains contact with imams and the leaders of other religious groups. These contacts include the Minister of Islamic Orientation, Literacy Programs, and Traditional Education.

The U.S. Ambassador actively engages prominent religious leaders in a dialogue to broaden mutual understanding of religious freedom principles, and to explain the freedom with which Muslims practice their religion in America. In May, an imam who leads a Maryland mosque came to Nouakchott to lecture on how Islam is practiced freely in the United States. In June, the U.S. Government contributed \$25,000 for the preservation of Islamic manuscripts.

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